

Close Encounters of the Frosh Kind: Coordinating Freshman English Assignments in the Archives

In September 2011, Professor Hephzibah Roskelly of the Department of English contacted the UNCG University Archives about a collaborative project designed to bring ten English 101 and 104 courses (taught by five PhD candidates) into the Archives to perform primary source research. This poster details this multi-class research project that, over the 2011-12 academic year, introduced over 200 freshmen to University Archives and archival research.

Planning Process

Met five times with instructors during Fall 2011 to discuss assignment development

- Included extensive introductions to University Archives, finding aids, research guides, and digital collections and resources
- Facilitated discussions with other instructors who had previously used Archives for class assignments
- Discussed ways in which digitized resources could help alleviate potential logistical issues of large numbers of student researchers

Created a LibGuide to bring all of the key resources together in one place

- Included links to all online resources as well as reminders of contact information, hours of operation, and other user FAQs
- Link to LibGuide added to each class's Blackboard site by instructor

Scheduled class visits for an overview of University Archives resources and archival research

- “Dog and pony shows” showed the students actual examples of archival records and collections before beginning their research
- Walked students through the process of searching for information in the various digital collections
- Most classes included an additional research visit, a designated class period where students could come into the Archives to begin or continue research



Challenges

Lack of archival research experience by most instructors

- Some instructors did not fully understanding the time commitment required for archival research or the breadth of the collections
- Instructors were hesitant to narrow topic choices for students, leading to lack of focus when many students first entered the archives for research
- Instructors often scheduled research visits during class times when they would not be in town, making it more difficult for students to ask questions about the assignment while conducting their research

Managing various expectations

- Students faced difficulty narrowing or broadening topics to match the records available to them
- Students were not consistent in contacting the Archives ahead of time to schedule a research visit or inquire about available resources
- Archives staff faced difficulty in managing and retrieving materials for the sheer mass of students in the reading room at certain points

Not everything is online - or even described anywhere!

- Even after the archival orientation session, students expressed surprise at the small percentage of archival records that were available online
- Lack of finding aids for the majority of the archival collections meant more intense reference interviews and more required staff time
- Deep digitization in a few key subject areas (as opposed to broad digitization across the Archives) helped students hone in on topics

What is the “real” archives experience?

- Some instructors were averse to allow students to rely solely on digitized resources, even when they met the students' research needs
- Most student conducted research using only subject files (an artificial reference collection) as opposed to archival collections - is this a “real” archival research experience?

No one likes group research projects

- Many instructors assigned students to groups for conduct research, but had them write papers individually
- Easier for the Archives staff to manage, but more difficult and frustrating for the students who had to organize group research times

Future Plans

Discuss with instructors what worked and what didn't work in 2011-2012

- Learn about the quality of the student assignments and the students' feedback on their research experiences
- Review the challenges encountered by the Archives staff and discuss possible resolutions
- Quantify (as best as possible) the amount of staff time devoted to these projects during the academic year

Work with the same instructors returning for ENG 101 and 104 projects in Fall 2012

- Incorporate into the archives orientation a discussion of research topic selection and ways to narrow or broaden topics using resources available
- Create more subject-specific LibGuides to point students to available resources on specific potential research topics

Develop better assessment methods

- Create a database for tracking individual student communication from first point of contact through research room use
- Maintain a more accurate count of the total time spent working with students, from topic refinement to digital collections assistance to research room visits

For more information on this project, contact:

Erin Lawrimore, University Archivist
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
Martha Blakeney Hodges Special Collections and University Archives
erlawrim@uncg.edu • (336) 256-4038

Special thanks to Richard Cox (UNCG) and Rebecca Goldman (LaSalle University) for their assistance in developing this poster.